



XEN'DRIK EXPEDITIONS

A Costly Truth Crimson Codex Adventure #7 An Adventure for 7th Level Characters (Scaled for 7th to 10th Levels of Play)

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Sources: Complete Adventurer [Jesse Decker], Complete Divine [David Noonan], Eberron Campaign Setting [Keith Baker, Bill Slavicsek, James Wyatt], Fiend Folio [Eric Cagle, Jesse Decker, James Jacob, Erik Mona, Matt Sernett, Chris Thomasson, James Wyatt], Secrets of Xen'drik [Keith Baker, Jason Bulmahn, Amber Scott], Spell Compendium [Matt Sernett, Jeff Grubb, Mike McArtor]

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Adventure Background

Candle, the new director of operations in Xen'drik, has decided to reward the PCs for their efforts so far, including rescuing Zekeriff "Zeke" Brithlestone, the one-time leader of Codex operations on Xen'drik. The PCs are to begin advanced training with a special unit of the Crimson Codex. Upon successful completion of this training, the PCs will be promoted to the rank of Viper.

At an archaeological dig near where the Viper training is going to take place, unusual events are unfolding. The dig is an excavation of a ziggurat created long ago by drow elf servants at the demand of their giant masters. The ziggurat houses a portal that can be used to create and control manifest zones to other planes. The daelkyr Virulence has a vested interest in this portal, and he does not want it to fall into Codex hands.

Over time, Virulence has managed to turn some Codex operatives to his employ. One of those is a human druid by the name of Argent. Argent also happens to be one of the individuals in charge of the Viper training. Another individual involved in this drama is an elven Crimson Codex operative known as Oakenshaft. Oakenshaft, however, is really just in deep cover. He is still loyal to the Codex, and his mission is to act as a traitor against the Codex to learn more about Virulence's plans. Unfortunately, the elf's proximity to Virulence and his aberration followers have splintered his mind. The elf changes between three personas with no way to understand his own motivations: X is the true Crimson Codex operative, Oakenshaft is the traitor against the Codex in league with Virulence, and Talontoo is a cover identity as an archaeological laborer working on Codex digs. To make matters more complicated, X was asked by Argent to assist in the Viper training for the PCs.

Adventure Synopsis

The PCs are granted an audience with Candle, the new director of operations in Xen'drik. She orders them to report for special training. After escorting a scholar to an archaeological dig, the PCs proceed into the wilds of Xen'drik to train under Cantankerous, the grizzled dwarf, and a human druid called Argent.

The first challenge tests the PCs combat skills as they face wave after wave of summoned animals. The second challenge is interrupted by a comical attack by a worker from the archaeological dig. The PCs learn that this worker thinks the PCs have been involved in an attack on the site and have taken his son.

Exploring the dig reveals that strange creatures called keepers have captured the chief archeologist and others. The PCs learn that the dig has something to do with controlling manifest zones, and they also learn the elf who attacked them may not be who he claims to be.

Returning to the training compound, the PCs find their trusted instructor in combat with the elf and must decide whom to help. It is possible to fight only the traitor druid if the PCs can help bring the peaceful personality of Talontoo back to control, rather than the traitorous Oakenshaft.

Troubleshooting

The boot camp section allows the judge to playfully pick on one or more of the PCs to add some roleplaying to the adventure. Be aware of the maturity level and the sensibilities of the PCs as you do this. If any of the players take offense, simply tone down the roleplaying and proceed quickly to the monster combat training.

The monster fighting training session is supposed to be challenging but not overwhelming. Feel free to add more rounds between each fight for healing if it is too much, especially in the later waves. Each PC can quit at anytime. However, any PC that quits cannot participate in later waves. In addition, if the PCs are finding the training fights unchallenging, feel free to bump up the difficulty by adding more creatures and substituting more powerful creatures at your discretion.

If the PCs kill the elf Talontoo/Oakenshaft, the adventure can still proceed. Argent strongly suggests they search the elf and follow his tracks back to their source. Since the PCs have seen the dig site, they can find it easily. Argent is powerful enough that he can reincarnate Talontoo, and he does so if the PCs kill him. Argent knows Oakenshaft works for Virulence, so he does not want the elf dead.

The keepers only make a deal with the PCs if the PCs show no hesitation in making the deal and show no hints that they are going to renege on that deal. The keepers are single-minded in their mission to find and protect the secrets of the ziggurat, and nothing keeps them from that. Even the slightest indication that the PCs will not honor the deal causes the keepers to attack.

Adventure Start

As the players gather and prepare, get an idea of which previous Crimson Codex adventures they have played. Knowledge from these adventures may come into play during this adventure. The adventure assumes that the PCs are active and successful members of the Crimson Codex. If the PCs have never played in a Crimson Codex adventure before, provide a brief explanation of what the Crimson Codex is and what has happened previously, if you know the details. More about the Crimson Codex can be found on the RPGA website at <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/archeb/ebxe>. A summary of previous Crimson Codex adventures is available there to allow you to familiarize yourself with the current plot.

Once the players are ready, present the PCs with **Handout 1**. Give them all time to read it, and assume they know each other from other interactions within the Crimson Codex. Once they have the chance to read the handout, read or paraphrase the following as the PCs approach Happy Hubbard's Publishing House:

Some buildings in this section of town are boarded up and abandoned. The building you approach, however, is in nice repair. A sign above the door, newly painted, reads in Common: "Happy Hubbard's Publishing House."

The front and back doors to Happy Hubbard's Publishing House are locked, but the PC can gain entrance by simply knocking. The gnome Happy Hubbard unlocks the door and allows them entrance. If the PCs want to pick the lock for some reason, it is a DC 21 Open Locks check, although there are people in the street watching if they try to pick the front door's lock. The bottom floor of the publishing house is one large library and workroom, approximately 40 ft. by 40 ft., with only a small mudroom in the back, leading to a back door. The top floor contains some storage areas and Happy's living quarters. When the PCs enter, read or paraphrase the following:

The publishing house's ground floor is a breathtaking mess of books, scroll, parchment, ink, desks, and other tools of the trade. A gnome approaches you with his hand out. [PCs who have played Prophecy's Unwitting Servant or Turn of the Page have met Happy Hubbard already. PCs may also have a Story Object called "Access to Happy Hubbard's Collection" providing access to Happy Hubbard's library of tomes, books, and scrolls.] He says, "Welcome friends! It's a pleasure to have such distinguished visitors in my house." Behind him, seated in a comfortable chair, is a purple-tinged spellscale sipping from a teacup. [PCs who have played The Korranberg Affair or Turn of the Page have met Candle already.]

After introductions and small talk, the spellscale Candle speaks:

"I am very pleased with your service to the Crimson Codex. I do not regret making you one of my personal operatives. You have proven yourselves to be good Serpents and truly worthy of promotion. I have already spoken to our respected leader about you at great length, and he has allowed me to offer you admission to a special branch of the Codex. You will partake in a time-honored training given to members of our group who have earned the opportunity. Usually this training is only given to operatives on Khorvaire, but Ohnal has allowed me to offer this training to you on Xen'drik. Succeed and you will no longer be called 'Serpents.' Your new title will be 'Viper.' What say you?"

Give the PCs a moment to show their initial reaction to this. After they have said something, interrupt with the following:

At the mention of this special training, Happy Hubbard drops his teacup on the floor. He begins to rummage through the nearby stacks of papers and parchment. He mumbles to himself but you can hear certain parts: "Special training! Yes, I have heard about this. Where did I put that journal? The last group who tried that training died in the wilds of Droaam. Maybe it's over here." His voice trails off as he finally notices a stern look from Candle. "Sorry about that," he says ruefully. Then he continues thumbing quickly through the journal.

The PCs may have questions about the training and what it entails. Use the points below to guide the conversation:

- Candle provides the PCs with a map to a remote location deep in the wilds of Xen'drik. The journey should take three weeks.
- There is no marked trail after the first week of travel, and the PCs must travel on foot. Candle suggests using magic to stave off harsh weather conditions, as the temperature the last couple of days in Stormreach has been unseasonably warm, and the area to the south where the PCs are going is often warmer.
- Vipers are former Serpents who have gone through extensive training that provides them with skills and experience that most Codex operatives do not possess.
- The training is very dangerous. It can happen that those going through the training might perish.
- Candle cannot discuss the exact details of the training, as that is up to the current Viper trainers. She does mention that one of the trainers is a grizzled old dwarf who goes by the moniker "Cantankerous."
- Cantankerous served for many years in the Mror Hold militia before being recruited into the Codex. He runs Viper training camps in the same manner as an army boot camp.
- Candle is very fond of the old dwarf, as he instructed Candle in Viper training some years ago. Anyone who strikes out against Cantankerous or any of the other trainers is demoted immediately.
- Who the other trainers are she cannot say; she simply states that some of the Viper instructors request and are granted anonymity.

Allow the PCs to ask any other questions they may have. However, Candle does not provide any more information, aside from general items of knowledge. Candle then looks at each PC in turn and ask this question:

Will you accept the challenge of becoming a Viper?

If any PC refuses, Candle explains their time as Serpent in the Crimson Codex is over. She has a need for those fully dedicated to the cause and willing to die for it. Perhaps that PC would prefer to be assigned to a dig site deep in the Xen'drik jungles, where the threats and excitement are not too much? This ends the adventure for any PC who refuses Viper training.

Assuming each PC says yes, she has one last piece of information for them. There is a new identifying signal for Codex operatives to let one another know each other's affiliation. No longer are Codex members required to wear red. Now the "pass-signal" is pointing to something and starting a sentence with "Look at that." What comes after "look at that" depends on the status of the situation. If the situation is non-threatening, mention a color in the sentence. For example, "Look at that lovely red scarf the elf is wearing. I wish I had something that beautiful." If the current situation is hostile or has the potential for trouble, the sentence contains no color. In the future, the password is going to change much more frequently.

Happy Hubbard continues to search for the missing journal after Candle leaves. Any PC with the Research feat or who has the "Access to Happy Hubbard's Collection" Story Object (from CRC-1 *Prophecy's Unwitting Servant*) automatically finds the journal. Otherwise, the PCs must make a DC 30 Search check to find the journal within one hour, and they must be literate to make the check. For each DC less than 30 the PC with the highest check gets, add 1 hour to the time needed to find the journal. Ask the PCs how long they plan to search. If they say less than the amount of time it would take to find the journal, they do not get the information from it.

If and when the PCs do find the journal, they learn that this is a journal from a not-so-famous bard adventurer named Grimjaws. The journal mostly details the misadventures of the bard, but at one point the journal mentions the following regarding something Grimjaws refers to as "Viper training":

"Brother Stark finished off the last ape when the bears appeared. The first cut down Morlan the Bold, and Brother Stark was dropped by the second. Dart, our only cleric, was felled later by an enormous snake. Vendail and I, Grimjaws, bard extraordinaire, were the only ones left to face the remaining beasts. Alas, I never found out what that last creature was. After all, I didn't have to outrun the beast. Nay, I only had to outrun poor Vendail. A Viper's life was not for me!"

Part One – Travel into the Wilds

PCs are asked to escort Pinesky the half-drow scholar to a dig site. They can speak with him about anything they want, and in the process must deal with the heat and getting lost.

A Familiar Face

Allow the PCs to make their own travel arrangements. They can use their Cash on Hand to buy any equipment they normally have access to. They can also buy *scrolls of endure elements* and *potions of endure elements* for 3 times the DMG cost instead of 5 times.

On the morning of the day they are setting off to leave, their former handler Fritz-Roy approaches them. Read or paraphrase the following:

As you gather your gear and prepare for yet another journey south from Stormreach into the wilds of Xen'drik, a familiar form approaches you. His name is Fritz-Roy, and he was your handler in the Codex before you were promoted to be one of Candle's special operatives, answering only to her. Fritz-Roy points at the red dawn and says, "Look at that beautiful red sunrise." He grins. "I know you all are too important for the likes of me now." His tone is joking as he says this, but then he turns serious. "However, I have a favor to ask. There is an archaeological dig underway quite near where I believe you are heading, and one of my Tomes has been asked to go there. I was hoping you could escort him there, since it is on your way. I've approved it through Candle too."

Assuming the PCs agree, Fritz-Roy calls forth a cloaked figure waiting in the distance. The figure walks forward and pulls back the hood, revealing an ebon-skinned half-elf who the PCs may recognize as Pinesky, the Codex scholar (referred to as a "Tome") whom the PCs may have rescued in *Forbidden Knowledge* and who they may have met again in *The Korranberg Affair*. One (or more) of the PCs may also be the godparent of his daughter if they have that Story Object from *Forbidden Knowledge*.

Play Pinesky as a quiet and distant half-elf, who sometimes seems to act as if his mind is working on some far-away problem. Allow the PCs to roleplay with Pinesky and Fritz-Roy as they wish, but keep the action moving, as too much roleplaying now might lead to a time issue at the end of the adventure.

As Useless as a Map on Xen'drik

Although the PCs have a map showing the route to the area for Viper training, maps are of little use on Xen'drik due to the magical effects of lost continent. After the first week of travel southward into the wilds of Xen'drik, PCs must succeed at a DC 15 Survival check or DC 20 Knowledge (geography) check to move in the right direction for most of the day. PCs must choose which of these checks they want to attempt, and each PC can only make 1 of the checks each day. When the checks begin, the PCs are 10 days away from their destination. If they do not make the above checks, they only get half a day closer instead of a day closer. If they exceed the checks by 10 (DC 25 Survival check or DC 30 Knowledge (geography) check), they make extraordinary progress and this counts as getting 2 days closer without the need to make a check the next day. Any PCs with the Track feat can add a +4 circumstance bonus to the check. Any PCs with the Story Object "Knowledge of the Lost" from *EXE-1 Well of Woe* can add a +4 circumstance bonus to the check as well. PCs may not take 10 or 20 on this check due to the disorienting magic of Xen'drik.

For some role-playing fun, have the PCs thinking they finally succeeded and expect that a prominent landmark should be straight ahead, and then have them come upon something else. For added fun, have PCs make the same skill checks yet get differing results. Two PCs using Survival or Knowledge (geography) might make the exact same skill check with the exact same roll, but see two completely different sets of variables. One PC sees the constellations backward from the other. Play this up as much as possible until the PCs realize they are lost, but don't overplay it so as to cause frustration and hostility.

In addition to the problem of getting lost, the PCs must deal with the heat. For 12 hours of the day (from 8AM to 8PM, the temperature is over 90 degrees for the entirety of the PCs travels. See the rules for this on page 303 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Note that PCs who take any damage from heat exposure are fatigued.

On the journey, Pinesky remains quiet unless spoken to. He has a +7 modifier to his Knowledge (geography) check, so he can assist someone trying to make a check if he is asked to help. Pinesky does not suffer the effects of heat during the trip—assume he made all his checks and is accustomed to the heat.

Count the number of days the PCs spend traveling once the checks begin to avoid getting lost. This information is needed later.

The Dig Site

On the journey to the dig site and the Viper training area, the PCs can attempt to engage Pinesky in conversation. They learn a small bit about the dig site, and they learn what has happened to Pinesky in the past. He also reveals a small bit of the Prophecy he has interpreted, predicting a horrible fate for members of the Crimson Codex.

On the long and confusing trip to the dig site, Pinesky generally remains quiet. However, if the PCs can get Pinesky to open up, he can share some information with them. Allow this to happen if any of the following conditions are met:

- The PCs roleplay their interactions, slowly drawing Pinesky out.
- The PCs make a DC 20 Diplomacy check.
- The PCs make a DC 5 Diplomacy check and are the godparent of Pinesky's daughter.
- Some other method that would endear Pinesky to the PCs.

If the PCs are able to get Pinesky to talk, he can share the following bits of information:

- His wife Vistola and his daughter are doing well. [His daughter's name varies depending on who the godparent is. The girl is named after whichever PC is her godparent.]
- Pinesky spent more than 24 hours in the presence of a cadre of Virulence's forces. After being held prisoner, questioned, and examined for far longer than he cared to remember, he remembers nothing else. The next thing he remembered was being transported back to Stormreach by Crimson Codex serpents.
- Since that time, he has been trying to recuperate with his family. For a long time he was suffering from occasional blackouts, waking up in strange places around Stormreach with no recollection of how he got there. During the blackout periods, he often heard strange voices just on the edge of his consciousness, like he was dreaming but not quite.
- Pinesky doesn't know much about the dig site, except that it was supposedly an old drow elf structure built on the order of the giants. His expertise is needed now.
- Pinesky has a terrible feeling that the draconic Prophecy is pushing all of the civilized races toward the brink of a catastrophe on a level equal to those in the past that have changed the course of history. He can't quite understand what that catastrophe will be, or how it can be prevented, but he just knows it is coming and that it will be terrible.

Once the PCs arrive at the dig site, Pinesky thanks them for the escort. The training area is only about 12 hours from here to the south.

If the PCs ask for details about the dig site, supply the following:

- There are about a dozen workers here at the moment. A human woman seems to be in charge of the operation. An elf, a half-elf, and a human are consulting with her.
- There are also three human guards who are doubling as laborers. Three more half-orc laborers remove vegetation and sediment from a ziggurat partially buried in the ground.
- Nothing else of interest can be seen from here. If there is an entrance to the ziggurat, it has not yet been uncovered.

From here, the PCs should be interested in getting to their training site as quickly as possible.

Part Two – Viper Boot Camp

Arrival

After traveling through the wilds of Xen'drik and leaving Pinesky at the dig site, the PCs can spend 6 hours traveling to arrive at camp where they meet two of their trainers: Cantankerous, who seems to be in charge, and Argent, who is quieter and lets Cantankerous take the lead. Cantankerous should be played as intimidating, nasty, and unapproachable. Argent should seem kind, understanding and supportive of the PCs in their quest to become Vipers.

As they approach, paraphrase or read the following:

It's late afternoon and you see a compound newly built in the wilds of Xen'drik, complete with barracks, storage buildings, and a mess hall. Behind you, a forceful voice calls out: "That's far enough, fly larvae! I see a ragtag group with no discipline, weak backs and weaker minds. You must be the new trainees that

Candle sent. Curse the gods; I thought we'd be training real adventurers for a change! Well, we might as well get started. Call me Cantankerous—and this,” the dwarf says as he waves dismissively in the direction of a human, “is Argent. Form a straight line and call out your names one at a time. Move it, move it, move it!”

Allow the PCs to introduce themselves. Each PC must make a DC 10 Diplomacy check. If any PC is suffering from fatigue as a result of the heat, give that PC a -5 circumstance penalty to the check. Also, assess a -1 penalty for each day over 10 the PCs are late.

If all the PCs make the check, read the following:

“That’s enough of the pleasantries! Wanting to be a Viper and actually becoming one are two different things. Listen up!”

If one or more PC fails the check, Cantankerous insults the PCs along the following lines. Feel free to make your own insults, but keep in mind the maturity level of the players at the table:

“Does your grandmother adventure too? She’s more likely to become a Viper than you! You’ve earned one demerit already. I’m not impressed.”

After all the PCs have introduced themselves, Cantankerous barks out:

“Stop wasting my time! Get to the barracks. I expect you to stow all your gear in the chests, make your beds, and change into your uniforms. You can keep your holy symbols and spell component pouches if you think it’ll make a difference. Now move out!”

Do NOT repeat the instructions above. Ask each PC exactly what he or she is doing. The PCs should stow all of their armor, weapons, shields, magic items and other items in the storage chests at the foot of their beds. The PCs should then make the bed and change into the pink uniforms located inside the chests.

Cantankerous enters the barracks after the last PC has stated what he is doing. He assesses 1 demerit for ANY weapon, armor, shield, magic item or mundane item still on the PCs, but each PC can only earn 1 demerit for this. Do not assess a demerit if the PCs keep holy symbols or spell component pouches. He assesses a second demerit for not making the bed and another 2 demerits for not putting on the pink uniform. Feel free to verbally harass the party for not following instructions. After assessing the demerits (with a maximum of 4 per PC), Cantankerous makes sure that everyone stows their gear, makes the beds, and puts on the pink uniforms.

After making sure everything is in order, Cantankerous calls out, “Don’t you look sweet in your pink uniforms?! You might be Crimson Codex in Xen’drik, but in my camp you’re nothing more than little pink petunias. Let’s go to the mess hall.” As he turns and exits the barracks, he chuckles, “Can you eat dinner without help or will I have to feed you like little babies?”

After Cantankerous leaves, Argent speaks to the PCs pleasantly:

“You mustn’t pay too much attention to his tone, but pay very close attention to his meaning. I don’t know why, but he seems particularly gruff this time. Have you had dealings with Cantankerous before?”

After dinner, at approximately 8PM, Cantankerous orders the party to an early bed. If the entire party earned more than 7 demerits, they start training the next day at 5:00AM. Otherwise, they can sleep until 7:00AM.

Basic Training

The following morning begins with some physical training. The PCs can refuse to do any of the tasks below. However, they earn 5 demerits for doing so. Argent encourages the PCs throughout Cantankerous’ trials, aiding them in some of their tasks if he can.

- 1) If the PCs are forced to start at 5:00AM, Cantankerous takes them on a 5-mile hike through the wilds. Each PC must make a DC 10 Constitution check to keep up with Cantankerous’ vigorous pace. Failure earns 1 demerit.
- 2) Cantankerous takes the PCs to the mess hall for breakfast, and then he sends them out to the field in front of the barracks to stretch and warm up.
- 3) When Cantankerous arrives on the field, each PC must make a DC 10 Strength check to perform 50 pushups. Failure earns 1 demerit. Feel free to pick on any PC who fails the check.

- 4) He takes them to the edge of the compound and hands them a ranged weapon of their choice (bow, crossbow, sling, etc.) Each PC must make a ranged attack and hit a target with an Armor Class 10 from 20 feet away. Note these weapons are mundane and not masterwork. Failure earns 1 demerit.
- 5) Cantankerous gives each PC an old copy of *Stormrider's Chapbook* with some pages torn out. They have 15 minutes to put the missing pages back in the correct order. Each PC must make a DC 10 Intelligence check to do so. Failure earns 1 demerit. Argent is present during this task and aids any PC who asks him, giving a +2 on the Intelligence check. Cantankerous allows this, as it shows the PC is not a know-it-all who is not afraid to ask for help.
- 6) Cantankerous briefly tells the party that only the elite become Vipers. Certain tasks might seem trivial right now but could impact the PCs down the road. Each PC must make a DC 10 Sense Motive check. There is no penalty for failure. However, success indicates this first day is not the advanced training—it is just a warm-up for the tasks ahead.

After this basic training, the PCs are told to get rest, for tomorrow's training is going to be much more vigorous.

Summoned Monster Fights

The next morning, Cantankerous wakes the party at 7:00AM, feeds them breakfast, and escorts them back to the barracks. He orders them to remove the pink uniforms and use their gear stored in the chests. Next, he sends them to a field one mile from the compound to warm up for the tasks ahead of them. Cantankerous arrives some minutes later, and Argent and his animal companion can be seen at the northern edge of the field.

Cantankerous barks out, "Move into the center of the clearing. Let's see if you can fight and work as a team. Protect your flanks and watch out for the rear. You can quit at anytime by screaming like a little goblin whelp."

Fight One (EL 6)

Cantankerous nods to Argent, who reads a scroll. A DC 20 Spellcraft check reveals the spell is *summon nature's ally V*. Place 4 apes (*Monster Manual* page 268) on the battle map and roll for initiative. Be creative. Have the apes start at different places and target a different PC: no lightning bolt or fireball formations. Don't forget the apes have a 10-foot reach. The fight continues until all 4 apes are dead or disabled. Keep the party in initiative order and give them 2 full rounds to heal, cast spells, etc. from the initiative count when the last enemy falls. Then proceed to **Fight Two**.

Scaling the Encounter

8th-Level Characters: Use 5 apes.

9th- and 10th-Level Characters: The scroll is *summon nature's ally VI*. Use 5 dire apes (*MM* page 62).

Fight Two (EL 6)

Cantankerous nods to Argent again and he reads another scroll. Allow PCs to make a DC 20 Spellcraft check to learn the spell is *summon nature's ally V*. Place 2 brown bears (*Monster Manual* page 269) on the battle map and roll for initiative. Don't forget the bears have improved grab. The fight continues until the bears are dead or disabled. Keep the party in initiative and give them 2 full rounds to heal, cast spells, etc. Then proceed to **Fight Three**.

Scaling the Encounter

8th-Level Characters: Use 3 brown bears.

9th- and 10th-Level Characters: The scroll is *summon nature's ally VI*. Use 5 dire lions (*MM* page 63).

Fight Three (EL 7)

Cantankerous nods to Argent again, and he reads another scroll. Allow PC to make a DC 21 Spellcraft check to learn the spell is *summon nature's ally VI*. Place 2 giant constrictor snakes (*Monster Manual* page 280) anywhere on the battle map and roll for initiative. Don't forget the snake has reach and improved grab (bite), and that constriction damage stacks with the bite damage. The fight continues until the snakes are dead or disabled. After this the fight is over.

Scaling the Encounter

8th-Level Characters: The scroll is *summon nature's ally VI*. Use 3 giant constrictor snakes.

9th- and 10th-Level Characters: The scroll is *summon nature's ally VI*. Use 2 dire bears (MM page 63).

During these fights, Argent prepares to call off the animals if the PCs ask for help. Cantankerous watches the PCs closely. If he sees any PCs about to cast *protection from evil* (or any other protection spell) in order to hedge out the summoned creatures, he automatically counterspells it and warns them not use such amateurish tricks.

At the end of the battle, erase 2 demerits (total, not per PC) for each fight the PCs complete. Argent makes a point of complimenting the PCs on their efforts, no matter how they did during the testing. The best compliment Cantankerous can muster is "I figured I would have to scrape you off the field in a bucket. You aren't half the weaklings I thought you were. Now I get to watch you suffer tomorrow, so I get more entertainment than I had counted on."

Cantankerous allows the PCs to return to the barracks to rest and recuperate for the remainder of the day. He tells the PCs that the next day is going to be much more difficult than playing with Argent's little animal friends.

Part Three – A Costly Truth

Interrupted Rescue Mission

The next day, Cantankerous wakes the party at 8:00AM, feeds them breakfast, and escorts them on a two-hour journey away from the training compound. After approximately two hours of walking, Cantankerous stops and speaks:

"If you follow this trail for another hour, you will find a cabin made of stone. Your mission is very simple. Enter the cabin, find the prisoner, and bring him to freedom. Bring him back to the training area as quickly as you can. If I am not there, report to Argent."

He lets the PCs walk toward the cabin, but before the PCs can reach the cabin to undergo the next part of Viper training, something completely unexpected happens. The PCs can attempt a DC 6 Listen check to hear heavy running footsteps approaching through the thick jungle. Those who make the check can act in the surprise round. Read or paraphrase the following:

From out of the undergrowth, sixty feet ahead of you along the path, runs an elf. He wears tattered, sweat-soaked laborer's clothing, wielding the smallest pick you have ever seen. He glares at you and screams, "Give me back my son! Where have you taken him?" Without waiting for a reply, he charges with his minuscule pick. The anguish in his voice and the maliciousness of his attack somewhat lessened by the size of the weapon.

Creature: As the elf attacks, he continues to demand that the PCs return his son to him immediately. The elf attacking the PCs is exhausted, and he collapses after three rounds of combat. A DC 15 Heal check allows a PC to notice his state of exhaustion, and a DC 15 Sense Motive check determines the attacker is in anguish over the abduction of his son and that he believes the PCs are the kidnappers.

Talontoo: male elf archeological laborer (rogue 5/spymaster 4): hp 38; Combat Statistics.

Tactics: Talontoo charges and attacks the nearest PC. He only uses his tiny archaeologists pick to attack, and the PCs are in no danger from him. In his very troubled mind, he believes they are the ones who attacked the dig and kidnapped his son, giving him a very short adrenaline rush and allowing him to fight for the three rounds. If he is still conscious at that point, he collapses into a nearly comatose state.

Developments: If Talontoo has not been killed, the PCs may question him. Dead or not, they may wish to search him. Talking with him and/or searching him after the battle gives the PCs some enigmatic clues about a recent attack on the archeological dig where the PCs escorted Pinesky a few days before. If Talontoo is still alive for questioning, go to the section entitled **Questioning a Madman**. If the PCs search Talontoo, provide them with **Handout 2**. After the attack is over, the PCs can also make a DC 15 Intelligence check to remember seeing Talontoo working at the dig site where they left Pinesky.

Combat Statistics

TALONTOO/OAKENSHAFT/X CR 9

Male elf rogue 5/spymaster 4

N (CG) medium humanoid (elf)

Init +3; Senses Listen +14, Spot +14; low-light vision 60 ft.

Languages Common, Draconic, Elven, Gnome, Sylvan

AC 13, touch 13, flat-footed 10

hp 38 (9 HD)

Fort +2, Ref +11, Will +2; evasion

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares)

Melee tiny pick +2 (1d2/x4)

Base Atk +6; Grp +6

Atk Options sneak attack +4d6

Abilities Str 10, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 16, Wis 10, Cha 16

SQ cover identity (x2), low-light vision, magic aura, quick change, scrying defense, slippery mind, undetectable alignment

Feats Persuasive, Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, Skill Focus (bluff)

Skills Bluff +22, Decipher Script +13, Diplomacy +19, Disguise +21, Forgery +15, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (history +7, local +5, planes +5), Listen +14, Profession (archeologist) +4, Search +17, Sense Motive +12, Spot +14

Possessions tiny pick, a scrap of paper (**Handout 2**)

Cover Identity (Ex) This elf, known as X, has two cover identities: Talontoo, the archeological laborer and Oakenshaft, the mercenary adventurer. X gains a +4 circumstance bonus on Disguise checks and +2 on Bluff and Gather Information checks when operating in these guises.

Undetectable Alignment (Ex) This ability functions like an *undetectable alignment* spell, except that it is always active.

Quick Change (Ex) A spymaster can don a disguise in $\frac{1}{10}$ normal time and don or remove armor in $\frac{1}{2}$ normal time.

Scrying Defense (Ex) X/Oakenshaft/Talontoo receives +4 bonus to Will saves versus scrying attempts and to Spot checks to notice the sensors created by scrying.

Magic Aura (Sp) X/Oakenshaft/Talontoo can cast *Nystul's magic aura* at will as a 4th level caster.

Slippery Mind (Ex) X/Oakenshaft/Talontoo receives a second save against enchantment spells and effects as per the slippery mind ability of rogues.

Hook "You give back my son or die a slow agonizing death!"

Questioning a Madman

The elf that just attacked the PCs has a strange background story. He is first and foremost a deep-cover Crimson Codex Serpent known only as X. Not even Candle knows his true identity. X was sent into the field to pose as a traitor against the Codex, attempting to make contact with the forces of the daelkyr known as Virulence. His cover identity in this operation is known as Oakenshaft. Oakenshaft, in his guise as a traitor to the Codex, is currently posing as a laborer named Talontoo, working for an archeological dig.

Unfortunately, spending so much time in proximity to the forces of the daelkyr has caused X to go mad. The corrupting nature of the daelkyr and his aberrations left X suffering from an acute variety of schizophrenia. He has developed an entire personality for every role he sets out to personify, and that personality is in control of his being until its role has come to fruition. He is currently under the control of his laborer persona, Talontoo. This persona has selected memories from the recent past and has formulated a pseudo-reality that he interprets as the true reality in every way. This madness makes the PCs dealing with Talontoo/Oakenshaft/X a bit complicated.

He (as X) planned to attack the PCs as a surprise trial of their ability to think fast and make efficient choices while under pressure. However, X has been doing some deep undercover work as Oakenshaft, trying to find out about the daelkyr, Virulence and he has gone quite insane due to his dealings with Melia, the half-daelkyr daughter of Virulence.

So when the PCs first encounter X, his controlling personality is Talontoo, an innocent laborer who works at archaeological digs for the Codex. After the keepers attack the dig site, Talontoo's pseudo-reality kicks in, and he believes that the PCs have attacked the site and taken his (imaginary) son. In later encounters, the other personalities take over.

For the PCs to question Talontoo, they first need to calm him. Unless he is restrained, he tries to attack the PCs, with bare hands if necessary. Once subdued, he can be calmed with magic, with a DC 15 Intimidate check, with a DC 25 Diplomacy check, or with no check at all if the PCs promise to help him locate his son. Even as he speaks, he still says the PCs were involved in the attack, even if he was earlier convinced they were not. Once he has been calmed, he reveals the following, as dictated by the roleplaying of the situation:

- His name is Talontoo, and he is currently employed as a laborer at an archeological dig some hours north of here.
- The dig was attacked after midnight last night, and the attackers pulled his screaming son into the ziggurat at the site.
- Talontoo was in a trance a short distance from the dig when the attack took place, and by the time he could react it was all over. He decided to come looking for someone to help rescue his son and the others.
- He believes changelings or doppelgangers were involved in the attack. They moved strangely. During the attack the guards felled some of the changelings, but in the very next instance they were standing again. But they didn't stand up. They were just standing again! And they wore goggles.
- The door to the pyramid has been opened, but no one was allowed to go inside yet. There was a fear that traps might be present within.
- Only the chief archeologist, a human female named Hatholynn, knew what they were looking for at the dig. It had something to do with the method the ancient elves used to communicate with extraplanar beings.
- Talontoo sat near Hatholynn at dinner last night. He remembers her muttering something odd over and over while she picked at her food. She kept repeating, "It takes time to understand". Whatever that means?
- Work at the dig is a small-scale endeavor. No dragon shards are involved. It has only been worked for a couple of weeks. Personnel at the dig were Hatholynn, 4 guards (all dead), 3 other laborers (also all dead), the scholar Pinesky, his son Dergis, and himself. Hatholynn, Pinesky, and Dergis were forced into the pyramid.

During the questioning, Talontoo pleads for the PCs to let his son go. The facts above are a combination of the truth and the story X's Talontoo persona has set up as his current reality. Any Sense Motive checks or spells cast to tell if the truth is being told reveals that Talontoo is being truthful with all his answers. If the PCs ask Talontoo to accompany them to the dig, he makes every effort to do so, but he is just too physically and emotionally drained to go with them. He stumbles and passes out after a few steps, weeps hysterically about his son, or swears revenge on the PCs. He even attacks the PCs again at random intervals if they force him to accompany them.

If he is searched, his clothes are ripped and soiled from his run through the jungle. The pick is a normal archeologist's tool. A DC 22 Search check finds a scrap of parchment (**Handout 2**) that he (while in the persona of Oakenshaft) took from Hatholynn and hid in a secret compartment in his belt. Talontoo claims he knows nothing about the document or the secret compartment in his belt, which is true in his current persona.

If the PCs kill X and do not have the means to track his path back to the dig site, have them remember seeing him at the site where they left Pinesky. This should be the only hint they need that further answers rest there. If they decide to go seek out Cantankerous or Argent to seek guidance, they can travel back to the training site, although Talontoo howls and thrashes the entire trip, accusing the PCs of leaving his son to die in the pyramid. Back at the training area, Cantankerous is not present. Argent tells the PCs that the dwarf had to attend to some personal business and will be gone for at least 24 hours.

Argent knows that Oakenshaft is a traitor to the Codex, because Argent is as well. He also knows that the final bit of the PC's Viper training was supposed to be carried out by Oakenshaft, so he plays along with everything the elf does, assuming it is part of the test. He simply sits back and lets it play itself out. If the elf is killed, he accuses the PCs of murdering someone who posed very little real danger to the PCs and suggests they follow the elf's trail back to its origins, find out what happened there, and try to redeem themselves from their rash actions. If the elf is alive, he suggests the PCs question him.

If the PCs insist on first completing the training rescue mission, make every effort to dissuade them in character. First use Talontoo's ranting as motivation. Then use Argent to assure them that training can wait if a Crimson Codex site has been attacked. If the PCs insist on doing the training first, create your own encounter where the PCs enter a trapped building and rescue a manikin. Use a trap of your own creation or a trap from the DMG. Do not use a trap of more than EL 4.

To the Dig

If the PCs wish to investigate the attack on the dig, they can easily find it, as they have already been there with Pinesky. At the dig they must enter a trapped stairwell. They encounter some keepers that made a bargain with Virulence using Oakenshaft (X's traitor identity) as the broker. The PCs may rescue Dergis, Pinesky, and Hatholynn. More clues can be found to an ancient Elven puzzle.

When the PCs are ready to go to the dig, read or paraphrase the following:

Ahead in a glade sits a vine- and moss-covered ziggurat. Some of the undergrowth has been cleared away on the near side revealing an opening in the pyramid. Bodies of a half dozen men are strewn about the clearing. It is interesting that the elf's tracks you were following veer off to the north at this point, rather than coming from the glade in front of you.

If the PCs follow the path to the north, they come to another glade. The ferns and other small plants in this area have been trampled recently. If the PCs have an adventure secret to play, they can learn all of the following points. A Survival (Track) check also reveals the following based on the DCs:

- DC 15 - This was the staging area for an assault on the dig.
- DC 17 - Six or so heavy humanoids moved from here toward the dig.
- DC 20 - Presumably, Talontoo left by the path the PCs followed here at about the same time as the assault on the ziggurat.

This evidence should give the PCs pause about Talontoo's motives.

When the PCs enter the glade of the dig a DC 10 Heal check reveals the guards and laborers were killed with slashing and bludgeoning weapons. The opening to the ziggurat is unguarded, but the trap the keepers set off earlier has reset. There are no keeper bodies present in the glade, although a DC 17 Survival (Track) check or a DC 22 Search check locates damp depressions on the ground consistent with those left by such creatures.

When the PCs decide to enter the ziggurat read the following:

Steep stairs lead up to the opening, three quarters of the way up the north side of the ziggurat. Runes are carved into the stone around the opened door. A short hallway leads to a 10-foot square room with a spiral staircase in the center of its floor that descends into the darkness below. Above the staircase there is a 10-foot wide, 40-foot tall vertical shaft that rises to a stone ceiling.

There are exactly **336** steps leading to the opening in the ziggurat, if they are counted. A DC 20 Decipher Script check, *comprehend language* spell, or anyone who can read Elven knows the symbols around the opening say, "It takes time to understand". The spiral staircase descends **48** steps to another short hallway. The **4th** step is trapped (see below). The hall at the bottom of the staircase is 5 feet wide. It goes on for 25 feet, turns sharply to the right and goes on for 15 more feet to open into the inner suite. A keeper stands guard just outside the suite.

Trap: Reverse Gravity Trap; CR 7; magic device; proximity trigger (descending beyond the fourth step); duration 13 rounds; automatic reset in 4 rounds after duration ends; 4d6 falling up damage and 8d6 falling down damage; affects every one on the stairs and in the 10 foot room at the top of the stairs; DC 20 Reflex save avoids all damage if made before falling up, if that save fails a second DC 20 Reflex save can avoid the falling down damage; Search DC 32; Disable Device DC 32.

PCs who make their Reflex save are considered to have held on to something and therefore escaped damage. It is possible for the PCs who fell up to climb down from the ceiling to the floor with a DC 25 Climb check before the duration (4 rounds) ends. You may build a little paranoia here by letting the PCs hear the keepers moving toward them from below, but no attack ensues at this time.

The inner suite of the ziggurat consists of four chambers. The PCs first enter the largest of the four rooms. To do so they must get past a keeper, either by fighting or bargaining with secret knowledge. Past the keeper, the PCs see a square room that is 40 feet across. The room is empty except for three people apart from the keeper: Dergis, a young half-elf; Pinesky, the half-drow whom the PCs escorted here; and Hatholynn, an older human female, who are bound and gagged on the floor near the wall opposite the entrance.

The center section of the wall opposite the entrance has a very bizarre appearance. The stone seems to roil and flow as if it was liquid, but it does not run into the room. The second room is accessible through a stone door in the center of the wall to the right of the entrance. This room may have been a study or small

library centuries ago, but now it only contains the other keeper(s) who replace the keeper in the doorway if he is knocked unconscious or otherwise incapacitated without being killed. The third room is behind a magically locked stone door in the center of the wall to the left of the entrance. This door has some ancient Elven symbols engraved upon it. A DC 25 Decipher Script check, *comprehend language* spell, or any one who can read Elven can reveal what the symbols are (**Handout 3**). Both Dergis and Pinesky can read the symbols for the PCs if asked to do so. Although this room is empty, its walls and ceiling are filled with engravings of all sorts: strange arcane symbols and diagrams whose purpose can only be guessed. The fourth room lies beyond the strange flowing wall and is not accessible in this adventure.

Creatures: Keepers are outsiders that are not native to any one plane of existence. They have traveled all the planes throughout recorded time. They are drawn to knowledge and secrets, and whatever power created them ingrained in them the undeniable urge and mandate to ferret out, collect, and then guard secrets and knowledge.

Physically, keepers look at first glance like hairless, gangly elves wearing dark goggles and dark leather coats. Closer inspection reveals that these creatures' joints are loose and move in any direction. All keepers look practically identical.

Keepers (3): hp 26, 26, 26; Combat Statistics.

Tactics: If the PCs engage the keepers in combat, the keeper in the doorway fights until he is slain, knocked unconscious, or otherwise immobilized. If he drops but is still alive, his body is transported into the study area and a new keeper appears at the same moment to take his place in the doorway (*body switch* ability). This continues until all the keepers have been dispatched or the PCs stop trying to get into the room. The first time the switch takes place, give the new keeper a surprise round on the PCs.

If the keeper is slain, another keeper exits the study room to engage the PCs directly. This continues until either all the keepers are slain or until the PCs are no longer a threat. If an injured keeper is switched back into the study room, he can be healed with a cache of 5 *potions of cure serious wounds* kept there.

Developments: The keepers are not bright enough to figure out the door riddle. If the PCs make an attempt to talk to the keeper in the doorway before attacking, and can subsequently succeed at a DC 30 Diplomacy check, the keeper endeavors to strike a bargain with the PCs. The keepers are willing to give the PCs Dergis, Pinesky, and Hatholynn in exchange for the PCs opening the magically locked door, leaving immediately after they do so, and promising never to return or tell anyone else anything about this place, its contents, or the keepers. If a keeper is asked why they came here, or something similar, read the following:

The strange creature looks at you through dark goggles. "A prime... an elf named Oakenshaft, called upon us, on the behalf of a daelkyr known as Virulence, to reach an accord. The pact gave us the right to any secrets found inside this edifice on the condition that we never disclose those enigmas to anyone and protect the secrets from everyone. These terms we find most agreeable. Other primes tried to stop us from claiming our due and had to be dispatched. Oakenshaft said we should take these three captives to use as collateral in further bargaining with intruders."

If the PCs ask the keeper to describe Oakenshaft, the creature gives a precise description of Talontoo. The keepers call all creatures from this plane of existence "primes."

Puzzle Door: The ancient Elven symbols on the door translate into "1 is divided into 12; 12 are divided into 48; 48 are divided into the key to entry." If the PCs combine this with the clue, "It takes time to understand", they should come up with 336, which is the number of days in an Eberron year. One year contains 12 months; 12 months are divided up into 48 weeks; and 48 weeks are divided into 336 days. If "336 days" is spoken out loud in Elven, the door opens. Nothing else can open the door, and attempts to get past it with teleportation effects fail and do 3d6 points of damage to the PC attempting it as they get stuck halfway in the wall, then are shunted out.

No matter if the PCs parlay with or slay the keepers, they may peacefully camp for the night. Questioning them provides a little new information: Talontoo is a hard worker, he has worked on and off for Hatholynn for a year, and his wife died about 7 years ago without giving them a child. Talontoo showed an odd affection for Dergis, whom he always called "son," which no one thought of as strange because the young elf was of an age that he could have been a son to the older elf. If Hatholynn is asked about Talontoo more directly, read the following:

"Talontoo does have one peculiar quirk. He often asks me to watch out for Dergis when he goes off alone into the jungle. He is usually only gone for a day or two, but sometimes it's much longer. He always brings back a gift for Dergis and a special tea for me for my trouble. He is a good man", whispers Hatholynn.

She cannot say where Talontoo gets the gifts and tea. She never thought about it much, but now it seems odd that he could find such things in the jungle.

Scaling the Encounter

8th Level Characters: Use one additional keeper.

9th Level Characters: Use two additional keepers.

10th Level Characters: Use three additional keepers, and the first room contains two keeper guards instead of one.

Combat Statistics

KEEPER

CR 7

N medium outsider (native)

Init +3; Senses Listen +6, Spot +6; darkvision 60 ft., blindsight 200 ft., scent

Languages Common, Celestial, Infernal, telepathy

AC 19, touch 13, flat-footed 16

hp 36 (4 HD); DR 10/magic

Immune mind affecting effects, poison, sleep, paralysis, stunning, disease, death effects, necromantic effects, fort saves unless they affect objects, critical hits, sneak attacks, nonlethal damage, ability damage, ability drain, energy drain, death from massive damage

Resist acid 10, cold 10, electricity 10, fire 10, sonic 10; SR 13

Fort +6, Ref +7, Will +3

Speed 40 ft. (6 squares), climb 20 ft. (4 squares)

Melee glaive (mimic) +8 (1d10+6) or

Melee warhammer (mimic) +8 (1d8+4) and
warhammer (mimic) +3 (1d8+2)

Base Atk +4; Grp +8

Atk Options mimic weapon, poison spit

Abilities Str 19, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 15, Wis 9, Cha 6

SQ blindsight 200 ft., body switch, dissolution, hive mind, outsider traits, scent

Feats Dodge, Mobility, Spring Attack

Skills Climb +19, Escape Artist +18, Hide +10, Listen +6, Jump +19, Knowledge (history +9, planes +9),
Move Silently +10, Open Locks +10, Spot +6

Possessions dark leather coat, black goggles, 5 *potions of cure serious wounds* (total for the group)

Hook "Tell us the secret of this doorway and we will protect it from everyone, even you."

Mimic Weapon (Ex) A keeper can form the malleable flesh and bone in its arms into any melee weapon (even an exotic weapon) it has witnessed and then wield the weapon with proficiency. It can form either arm (or both arms) into a melee weapon that it could wield in that arm. It must fuse and form both arms to form a weapon that would be wielded two-handed. A mimicked weapon has all the properties of the standard weapon of that type. Attacks with these mimicked weapons are considered natural attacks.

Poison Spit (Ex) Once every 1d4 rounds, a keeper can spit a nauseating contact poison in a 20-foot cone. DC 14 Fortitude save; initial damage 2d6 round of nausea, secondary damage 2d6 Con.

Body Switch (Su) A keeper's hive mind and unique link to other keepers grants it a supernatural ability to exchange places with any other living keeper within 500 ft. As a standard action, a keeper can use teleport without error to reach the exact location of another keeper, instantly teleporting the other keeper and effectively switching places.

Dissolution (Ex) When a keeper is captured, pinned, or held helpless, it has 10 rounds to free itself or be freed by another creature. If it is not freed before that time, it dissolves into a 5 foot wide puddle of the same contact poison that it can spit. The puddle and any poison taken from it evaporate in 4 rounds. A keeper that dies also dissolves into the poisonous puddle. Any creature that touches the creature as it

dissolves (such as with a natural attack that strikes the death blow) or after it dissolves must make a Fortitude save as listed above.

Hive Mind (Ex) All keepers within 500 ft. of each other are in constant communication with one another.

If one is aware of a particular danger, all are. If one in the group are not flat-footed, none are. No keeper is considered flanked unless all within 500 ft. are.

And Back

Back at the training complex, Argent has figured out that Oakenshaft's dealings with Virulence have splintered the elf's mind. He has coaxed the persona of Oakenshaft back, so now X believes he is a traitor to the Codex working for Virulence.

As the PCs near the training complex, they hear sounds of combat. Talontoo, now fully equipped and in the persona of the traitor Oakenshaft, is firing his bow at Argent. This combat is a ruse to get the PCs between the true traitor Argent and the insane Oakenshaft, so the PCs can be eliminated before they figure out the betrayal of the Crimson Codex. As the PCs approach, Argent takes cover behind the PCs and demands that they take out Talontoo or Oakenshaft or whoever he might be. Once the PCs are engaged, Argent and his animal companion take the opportunity to attack the PCs from behind. If at some point during the battle, the presence of Dergis is forcefully pointed out to Oakenshaft, his personality shifts back into Talontoo, who believes that he is a simple laborer, overjoyed at the rescue of his "son." At that point he turns against Argent and assists the PCs in the final battle. If Dergis' presence is not made clear to Oakenshaft, the PCs must fight a tough battle on two fronts.

When you are ready read the following:

Trekking back to the training facility with Dergis, Pinesky, and Hatholynn in tow has provided a small interlude of calm. However, as you near the compound, the all-too-familiar sounds of combat can be heard, and an armored Talontoo is attacking Argent from a distance with arrows fired from a longbow. As Argent and his lion run toward your party he calls out, "Help! He spotted you coming, cursed, and started firing arrows at me. I believe Oakenshaft is a traitor to the Crimson Codex. You must kill him, now!"

Some players may pick up on the fact that Argent called the elf "Oakenshaft," especially if they heard that name earlier from the keepers. This could tip them off that Argent knows more than he should.

Creatures: The PCs have met them all before, but now they must fight them.

Oakenshaft/Talontoo/X: male elf rogue5/spymaster 4: hp 47; Combat Statistics

Argent: male human druid 9: hp 63; Combat Statistics.

Lion animal companion: hp 80; Combat Statistics.

Tactics: Argent moves behind the PCs while encouraging them to attack Oakenshaft. He has pre-cast spells, as indicated in Combat Statistics for him and his lion. The protection from energy will cover whichever element the PCs used most in the battle with the summoned animals, defaulting to electricity. If questioned on why he is calling Talontoo by that name, he looks angry and attacks immediately.

Argent can grow eagle's wings and fly up if the PCs have no real ranged threats. He can also gain a natural armor of 7 if the PCs are attacking him to great effect. He has precast *breath of the jungle*, making his two poison spells harder to resist by 2 points. He swaps out spells to cast summon nature's ally in order to keep the PCs busy while he casts spells on them. His animal companion attacks the nearest threatening PC. From there, he uses the rest of his spells and attacks to his greatest advantage. At higher levels, he also has trained animals with him that he can order to attack (automatic) as a move action.

If it looks as if he is sure to lose the battle, Argent orders his animal companion to flee with him, leaving the summoned and trained creatures to cover their retreat.

If the PCs are tricked, Argent attacks them from the rear, choosing the weakest combatant in the party first. He should know the PCs abilities quite well from observing the training sessions. Both Oakenshaft and Argent assail the PCs relentlessly using their most effective attacks, each trying to drop an individual PC before moving on to the next.

If a PC persists in trying to get Talontoo to recognize that they rescued Dergis for two consecutive rounds, the Talontoo persona suppresses the Oakenshaft persona, and he starts attacking Argent or his beasts instead of the PCs. If the PCs keep attacking Talontoo after his personality shift, he drops his weapons, tries to get to Dergis, and attempts to flee the area with his "son" in tow.

Developments: If Talontoo manages to stay alive, after the battle he rushes over to Dergis, embraces the younger elf, and thanks the PCs profusely for saving his son. The armor and weapons he wears confound

him, and he has no memory of donning these items. If the PCs recognize the fact that Talontoo/Oakenshaft/X is schizophrenic and present reasonable evidence to Cantankerous or Candle (not hard to do – DC 5 Diplomacy check), X is placed under protective custody until he can be healed.

Scaling the Encounter

8th Level Characters: No change.

9th Level Characters: Add one dire tiger, which Argent has trained to assist him.

10th Level Characters: Add two dire tigers, which Argent has trained to assist him.

Combat Statistics

TALONTOO/OAKENSHAFT/X CR 9

Male elf rogue 5/spymaster 4

N (CG) medium humanoid (elf)

Init +3; Senses Listen +14, Spot +14; low-light vision 60 ft.

Languages Common, Draconic, Elven, Gnome, Sylvan

AC 26, touch 17, flat-footed 21

hp 47 (9 HD)

Fort +5, Ref +13, Will +4; evasion

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares)

Melee +1 rapier +7/+2 (1d6+1)

Ranged +1 longbow +12/+10 (1d8+1)

Base Atk +6; Grp +6

Atk Options Point Blank Shot, sneak attack +4d6

Combat Gear *potion of cure serious wounds*, *potion of expeditious retreat*

Abilities Str 10, Dex 20, Con 12, Int 16, Wis 10, Cha 16

SQ cover identity (x2), low-light vision, magic aura, quick change, scrying defense, slippery mind, undetectable alignment

Feats Persuasive, Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, Skill Focus (Bluff)

Skills Bluff +22, Decipher Script +13, Diplomacy +19, Disguise +21, Forgery +15, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (history +7, local +5, planes +5), Listen +14, Profession (archeologist) +4, Search +17, Sense Motive +12, Spot +14

Possessions combat gear plus +1 longbow, +1 rapier, +2 mithral chain shirt, +2 darkwood buckler, cloak of resistance +2, ring of protection +2, amulet of health +2, gloves of dexterity +4, 20 masterwork arrows, dagger, 47 gp

Hook “What do you mean, you rescued my son? I have no son!”

Cover Identity (Ex) This elf, known as X, has two cover identities: Talontoo, the archeological laborer and Oakenshaft, the mercenary adventurer. X gains a +4 circumstance bonus on Disguise checks and +2 on Bluff and Gather Information checks when operating in these guises.

Undetectable Alignment (Ex) This ability functions like an *undetectable alignment* spell, except that it is always active.

Quick Change (Ex) A spymaster can don a disguise in $\frac{1}{10}$ normal time and don or remove armor in $\frac{1}{2}$ normal time.

Scrying Defense (Ex) X/Oakenshaft/Talontoo receives +4 bonus to Will saves versus scrying attempts and to Spot checks to notice the sensors created by scrying.

Magic Aura (Sp) X/Oakenshaft/Talontoo can cast *Nystul's magic aura* at will as a 4th level caster.

Slippery Mind (Ex) X/Oakenshaft/Talontoo receives a second save against enchantment spells and effects as per the slippery mind ability of rogues.

ARGENT

CR 9

Male human druid 9

NE medium humanoid (human)

Init +2; Senses Listen +4, Spot +4

Languages Common, Druidic, Daelkyr

AC 22, touch 14, flat-footed 20

hp 63 (9 HD)

Fort +9, Ref +6, Will +12

Speed 20 ft. (4 squares); fly 60 ft. (average, 12 squares)

Melee +1 *scimitar* +8/+3 (1d6+3/18-20)

Ranged +2 *sling* +10/+5 (1d4+3)

Base Atk +6; Grp +7

Combat Gear *potion of cure serious wounds* (2)

Abilities Str 12, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 18, Cha 14

SQ animal companion, nature sense, resist nature's lure, spontaneous casting (*summon nature's ally*), trackless step, wild empathy, wild shape (small, medium, or large creature 3x/day, 9 HD maximum), woodland stride, venom immunity

Feats Augment Summoning, Eagle's Wings, Elephant's Hide, Empower Spell, Spell Focus (necromancy)

Skills Concentration +13, Handle Animal +14, Knowledge (nature) +16, Spellcraft +12, Survival +22

Possessions combat gear plus +2 *sling*, +1 *scimitar*, +1 *wildwood breastplate*, +2 *darkwood buckler*, +2 *cloak of protection*, *ring of protection* +2, *amulet of wisdom* +2, 10 bullets, dagger, 200 gp

Druid Spells Prepared (CL 9th):

5th—empowered poison (DC 20)

4th—arc of lightning (DC 18), ~~freedom of movement~~, empowered splinterbolt (2 4d6 bolts)

3rd—cure moderate wounds, ~~greater magic fang~~, poison (DC 18), ~~protection from energy~~

2nd—~~barkskin~~, ~~bear's endurance~~, fog cloud, heat metal (DC 16), summon swarm

1st—~~breath of the jungle~~, cure light wounds, ~~endure elements~~, faerie fire, entangle

0—create water, detect magic, flare (3), read magic

Hook “Oops, so sorry! That lion was supposed to attack Oakenshaft not you. It was an accident, really!”

LION ANIMAL COMPANION

CR –

N large animal

Init +5; Senses Listen +8, Spot +8

AC 21, touch 12, flat-footed 18

hp 80 (11 HD)

Fort +9, Ref +12, Will +4 (+8 vs enchantment); evasion

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares)

Melee 2 claws +15 (1d4+7) and
bite +12 (1d8+3)

Space 10 ft.; Reach 5 ft.

Base Atk +8; Grp +19

Atk Options pounce, improved grab, rake 1d4+3

Abilities Str 24, Dex 20, Con 15, Int 2, Wis 12, Cha 6

SQ devotion, low-light vision, scent

Feats Alertness, Dodge, Mobility, Multiattack^B, Weapon Focus (claw)

Skills Balance +9, Hide +5 (+17 in tall grass), Listen +8, Move Silently +13, Spot +8

Special Ability (XX) text that explains a special attack or ability

Below are the stats updated to include *greater magic fang*, *freedom of movement*, *bear's endurance*, *barkskin*, and *protection from energy*:

LION ANIMAL COMPANION

CR –

AC 25, touch 12, flat-footed 22

hp 90 (11 HD)

Fort +11, Ref +12, Will +4 (+8 vs enchantment); evasion

Melee 2 claws +18 (1d4+10) and

bite +15 (1d8+6)

Atk Options pounce, improved grab, rake 1d4+6

Abilities Str 24, Dex 20, Con 19, Int 2, Wis 12, Cha 6

Ending the Adventure

Assuming the PCs take care of the traitor Argent, and somehow deal with Oakenshaft—either fixing his troubled mind or killing him—Cantankerous returns roughly 12 hours later. At first he cannot believe his eyes, and he makes his wrath known to the PCs through a verbal tirade. When the PCs get a chance to explain the situation to him, he calms himself and uses magic to contact Candle, who arrives on the scene before the end of the day.

If the PCs figure out that Talontoo/Oakenshaft/X is schizophrenic and bring out the Talontoo persona during the battle, defeat Argent and relay what they know about the ziggurat to Candle, they are held in the highest regards by the Crimson Codex. Killing or otherwise defeating Oakenshaft along with Argent only lowers their esteem a little.

If the PCs made a deal with the keepers to keep quiet about the ziggurat, Candle asks them to return there and take control of the ziggurat. If the PCs finished the adventure quickly, go back and run the combat with the keepers. If there is no time, assume another group of Serpents are tasked to complete that job. Lawful good characters with alignment restrictions who break their word to the keepers may have to fight the battle with the keepers without their class benefits, but the Codex pays for an immediate atonement spell to put things right.

Assuming the PCs succeeded in securing the ziggurat and dealing with Argent, Cantankerous grudgingly agrees that they have passed the training and have earned the title of Viper. Any PCs who earned 0 or less demerits in the course of their training receive the Esteem of Cantankerous story object.

Event Treasure

If the PCs are playing another session of Xen'drik Expedition at this event with these characters, they can take with them the following items: a +2 weapon or armor of their choice (can include a special property), a *potion of barkskin* +3, 3 *potions of cure serious wounds*, and a potion of any 3rd level or lower divine spell appearing in the DMG in the treasure section. The caster level of the potion is minimum for that spell.

Adventure Questions

1. How many monster waves did the PCs defeat in the training session?
 - a) They did not defeat the first wave.
 - b) They defeated the first wave only.
 - c) They defeated the first and second wave.
 - d) They defeated all three waves.
2. Did the PCs question and search Talontoo?
 - a) Yes, they did both.
 - b) They only questioned him.
 - c) They only searched him
 - d) They did neither.
 - e) They did not get this far.
3. Did the PCs search the staging area for the keepers attack and find evidence that Talontoo may be in league with the keepers?
 - a) Yes.
 - b) They searched the area, but did not find the evidence.
 - c) No.
 - d) They did not get this far.
4. How did the PC deal with the staircase trap?
 - a) They did not get that far.
 - b) They blindly walked into it and set it off.
 - c) They searched the area, but did not find the trap and set it off.
 - d) They searched the area, found and disarmed the trap.
5. How did the PCs deal with the keepers?
 - a) They killed them without having any parley.
 - b) They talked to the keepers then killed them.
 - c) They accepted the keepers' bargain.
 - d) The keepers killed or drove off the PCs.
 - e) They did not get this far.
6. How did the PCs handle the last combat?
 - a) The PC's got Talontoo's persona to take over and he helped the PCs defeat Argent.
 - b) The PCs defeated both Oakenshaft and Argent in combat.
 - c) The PCs were forced to flee.
 - d) The PCs were killed.
 - e) They did not get this far.
7. How would you rate the group's roleplaying?
 - a) Fantastic. Everyone had interesting and engaging characters that interacted with the adventure in very fun ways.
 - b) Good. Most everyone had interesting and engaging characters that interacted with the adventure in very fun ways.
 - c) Okay. There was some roleplaying.
 - d) None. They treated the adventure as a set of objectives. There was no roleplaying.

Story Objects

Object ID: EXCC22

Object Name: Esteem of Cantankerous

Object Description: You have impressed Cantankerous the trainer with your adventuring talents, and you have no demerits from him. You can immediately add any ONE feat, spell, or magic item to your Adventure Journal, and this counts as the item being unlocked. You don't have to use expansion slots for this item. It must be one that you could normally unlock.

Object ID: EXCC23

Object Name: Securing the Ziggurat

Object Description: You have defeated the keepers and secured the ziggurat for the Codex. For this great service the Crimson Codex presents you with a gold medallion. This medallion is not magical, but it is valuable. Your EV increases by 1000 gp permanently. This medallion may have other game effects later.

New Rules

Eagle's Wings [Feat] from *Complete Divine*

You can take wing and fly with the grace of an eagle.

Prerequisite: Ability to wild shape.

Benefit: You can spend one wild shape to grow feathery wings. These allow you to fly at a speed of 60 feet (average maneuverability). The wings remain for one hour.

Elephant's Hide [Feat] from *Complete Divine*

You can thicken your skin to the toughness of an elephant's.

Prerequisite: Ability to wild shape into a Large creature.

Benefit: You can spend one wild shape to give yourself a natural armor bonus of 7. This does not stack with any natural armor you currently have. The effect lasts for 10 minutes.

Arc of Lightning from *Spell Compendium*

Conjuration (Creation) [Electricity]

Level: Druid 4, sorcerer/wizard 5, Windstorm 5

Components: V, S, M/DF

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: Close (25 ft. + 5 ft./2 levels)

Area: A line between two creatures

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: Reflex half

Spell Resistance: No

This bolt deals 1d6 points of electricity damage per caster level to both creatures and to anything in the line between them. Both creatures must be in range, and you must be able to target them both (as if this spell had them as its targets). Draw a line from any corner in one creature's space to any corner in the other's space. It affects all squares in this line.

Splinterbolt from *Spell Compendium*

Conjuration (Creation)

Level: Druid 2

Components: V, S, M

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: Close (25 ft. + 5 ft./2 levels)

Effect: One or more streams of splinters

Duration: Instantaneous

Saving Throw: None

Spell Resistance: No

You must make a ranged attack to hit the target. If you hit, the splinterbolt deals 4d6 piercing damage. A splinterbolt threatens a critical hit on a roll of 18-20. You can fire one additional splinterbolt for every 4 levels beyond 3rd (to a maximum of three at 11th level). You can fire these splinterbolts at the same or at different targets with 30 feet of each other and fired simultaneously. A creature's damage reduction, if any, applies to the damage from this spell. The damage is treated as magic and piercing for the purpose of overcoming damage reduction.

Breath of the Jungle from *Spell Compendium*

Transmutation

Level: Druid 1

Components: V, S, DF

Casting Time: 1 standard action

Range: Medium (100 ft. + 10 ft./level)

Effect: Mist spreads in a 40-ft. radius, 20 ft. high

Duration: 1 minute/level

Saving Throw: None

Spell Resistance: No

The DC of any saving throw made within the mist against poison or disease increase by 2. The mist does not provide concealment.

Handout 1

[A low-ranking Crimson Codex operative whom you have seen before delivers this message to you. The message is written in a neat script in your native language.]

Greetings Brave Serpent,

Your successful service to our humble organization has not gone unnoticed. Your names and deeds have rivaled those of the greatest of our order. In time, our enemies will know of your fame and plot against you.

On the break of dawn of the next Sul, you will meet me at Happy Hubbard's Publishing House to discuss your future service.

Your peer in foresight, I am,

**Candle
Director of Operations in Xen'drik**

Handout 2

This scrap of paper was found in a secret compartment in the elf's belt. It is written in Elven.

"It takes time to understand."

Handout 3

Engraved in Elven on the Stone Door in the Ziggurat's Inner Suite:

1 is divided into 12;

12 are divided into 48;

48 are divided into the key to entry.

Map of the Outdoor Training Arena



[This map was created using a single pack of *Ruins of the Wild Dungeon Tiles*. Feel free to create your own interesting terrains for the battle with the summoned animals, or use this one.]

Map of the Ziggurat

